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TRA Studies Tennessee's Digital Divide, Issues Report

The report finds that Tennesseans are less likely to own computers and to be connected to the Internet than the national average.

NASHVILLE – The Tennessee Regulatory Authority (TRA) has prepared a report discussing the state of computer ownership and Internet access among Tennesseans.

The report, *"Tennessee's Digital Divide,"* ascertains how Tennessee measures in access to information technology tools - tools such as ownership of personal computers and Internet access, as compared to the rest of the nation. The term "digital divide" refers to the separation between those with access to these tools and those without.

Overall, the TRA's analysis found that Tennessee's digital divide is even more widespread than the national divide - with only 37.5% of Tennesseans owning personal computers, as compared to 42.1% nationally. The report further shows that even fewer Tennesseans are connected to the Internet, despite the fact that computer ownership statewide has doubled since 1994.

The report discusses the possible consequences of not addressing the state's digital divide; consequences that include a technologically illiterate workforce largely unprepared to survive and prosper in the ever-expanding information age.

"Computer literacy has become the fourth pillar to the traditional three tenets of education: reading, writing, and arithmetic, and that a failure to acquire this technical knowledge will result in large segments of our population being left behind because of a lack of computer skills," says the report.

The Tennessee Digital Divide report also finds that:

- Tennessee households earning more than $75,000 annually are **four times** more likely to own a PC than a Tennessee household earning $15,000 or less, and **three times** more likely than a household earning between $15,000 and $35,000 annually.

- Caucasian households in Tennessee are twice as likely to own a computer than Tennessee's African-American households. Further, the gap in computer ownership between the two households is 20% greater than in 1997.

- Computer penetration in Tennessee's urban areas exceeds rural areas in every income category, and only one-third of the state's rural residents own computers.

- Two parent households in Tennessee are twice as likely to own a computer than single parent households.

- Southern states lag behind other regions of the nation in computer ownership and Internet access, with nine of the ten lowest ranked states being located in the South.

The report makes known a number of policy initiatives already underway that are aimed at bridging the digital divide. These initiatives include the development of alliances between those sectors (public and private), that have expressed a vision for addressing the issue, as well as initiatives designed to further the advancement of pro-competitive policies that would make advanced technologies more accessible to undeserved areas.

The report concludes with the observation that the majority of Tennesseans lack the tools and training necessary to survive in this Information age - a deficiency that could affect the state's future economy.

A complete copy of this report can be found on the TRA web site at *www.state.tn.us/tra.*

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